Unitarian Horizons

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POLITE UNLEARNING

ONE of the most charming and provocative of the essays by Samuel McChord Crothers bears the title "The Anglo-American School of Polite Unlearning," and has to do with the preconceived notions and prejudices which people in one country cherish concerning the inhabitants of other countries. Dr. Crothers suggests that it would be mutually advantageous if all such ideas and sentiments could be unlearned.

The process of unlearning isn't easy, but it can be carried through in the atmosphere of good

manners. It can be polite unlearning. But even if it is polite, it will almost certainly be painful. Modern education has made considerable progress in the direction of reducing the amount of pain involved in what is now called "the learning process," but not even progressive education has eliminated the pain from the process of unlearning. Prejudices strike their roots deep, and when they are pulled up they are apt to bring large chunks of self-esteem with them. Even when the dose is pleasantly and humorously administered, the medicine that cures us of preconceived (and erroneous) ideas is seldom agreeable to the taste. The smile with which we acknowledge the foolishness of long cherished opinions is almost invariably a wry and twisted one.

ABOUT UNITARIANS

AMONG the things which many people should be politely encouraged to unlearn are certain widely held opinions with regard to Unitarians. There is the notion, for example, that all Unitarians are endowed by their Creator with highly superior intellects, so that a Unitarian Church is very much like a gathering of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences, or some equally learned society. The plain fact is, of course, that Unitarians are very much like any other company of people, with as wide a range of brain-power as any group of like numbers. If there is anything of truth behind this quaint idea,

it is perhaps the very different proposition that Unitarians enjoy using what brains they happen to have — even in their religion.

Another very common example is the belief that Unitarians know nothing and care nothing about the Bible. I have known Unitarians whose ignorance of the contents of the Bible was abysmal — but I have known very few. I have met Unitarians who talked as though they cared nothing about the Bible — but they have been even fewer. What I have discovered is that the great majority of Unitarians know the Bible very much more thoroughly, and hold more sensible views about its origin and character, than most other people. I rather think Unitarians take the Bible more seriously, and are more concerned to use it intelligently, than the average Christian. Unitarians don't like to accept thoughtlessly the traditional ideas about anything of importance — and rather specially with regard to the Bible.

UNITARIANS AND CHRISTMAS

BUT the popular notion about Unitarians which most annoys me is the idea that because we do not accept the orthodox Christian doctrine concerning Christ we have no interest or concern in the observance of Christmas. I have even had people tell me that a Unitarian has no real right to celebrate Christmas at all!

There are many ways to answer this amazing piece of complete misinformation, but I think the

best way is to turn to any good hymn-book and point out how many of the most beloved and familiar Christmas hymns were written by Unitarians. "It came upon the midnight clear" was written by Edmund Hamilton Sears; "Watchman, tell us of the night" by Sir John Bowring; "I heard the bells on Christmas day" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; "What means this glory round our feet" by James Russell Lowell, and "In the lonely midnight" by Theodore Chickering Williams — Unitarians all.

The central belief of Unitarians is the innate and infinite worth of every individual human soul, and Unitarians find in the Christmas festival an incomparably beautiful and moving symbol of that central belief. The child in the stable in Bethlehem is for us an eternal witness to the divine possibilities in every child; and so we love to come, on Christmas Eve, in company with the shepherds and the wise men, to acknowledge before the manger where Jesus lay our reverence for him and our love for the glad tidings of great joy which came into the world so long ago.

For Jesus brought glad tidings
To all the sons of men —
"In every child forever
God's love is born again."
So on this Christmas morn
In every heart that loves him
The dear Christ child is born.

We love to sing together at Christmas time, and we have a very deep-seated conviction that what matters most is not whether we hold all the traditional theological beliefs concerning the person and office of Jesus Christ, but rather whether something of his spirit of happy, outgoing, radiant joy has captured our hearts, and found expression in the words and deeds of our daily lives. We remember who it was that said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." And we are inclined to believe that an important part of that "will" is to be happy ourselves and to make others happy, if we may — which, after all, is a very considerable element in any proper observance of Christmas Day.

TURNING THE TABLES

BUT if there are notions about Unitarians which we should politely like to have other people unlearn, there are at least as many which Unitarians hold concerning themselves, which *we* ought to unlearn, some of them apparently trivial and some obviously important.

There is, for example, the idea that Unitarians do so much for the civic and social welfare of the communities in which they live that they may properly be excused from doing anything very much for their own churches. This seems to me a particularly dangerous mistake for anyone to

harbor in his mind. It rests upon a complete misunderstanding of the nature and function of a church, and it leads directly to spiritual starvation for those who hold it and practical disaster for the churches. It would be much nearer the truth to say that the more one does for the community the more one needs the sustaining strength of the church and the more one ought to do for the church in order to receive what the church has to offer.

The sensible man who wrote the Epistle of James had no use for faith without works, but he was far too sensible to suppose that one could have works without faith. To be a good citizen, socially minded and public spirited, may be one of the best evidences of a sound religious faith; but it is not a substitute for it. To give generously to the social agencies of one's town may be a fine demonstration of honest religious conviction; but it is no excuse for not giving generously to one's church.

TOLERANCE OR INDIFFERENCE?

THEN there is the idea that Unitarians are so devoted to the virtue of tolerance that they may be forgiven for falling into the vice of indifference. "After all," some of us are heard to say, "after all, there is good in every church and some truth in every religion, so what difference does it make whether we, or our children, go to this church or that?" And then, if we are not very

much on our guard, we go on to say that what matters is the kind of life we live, and it really makes no difference what we believe.

Unless we can unlearn that idea, politely if possible but by main force if necessary, there will certainly be no future for the Unitarian Church. A man's life depends absolutely upon what he believes. If his beliefs are unsound and superstitious, he cannot live as he would if his beliefs were sound and rational. Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles? Not in this world, anyhow. And the only solid basis for tolerance of the ideas and beliefs of men who differ from us is a firm hold upon the ideas and beliefs which seem true to us. In religion, as in every department of life, mutual respect presupposes self-respect.

POSITIVE BELIEFS

AGAIN, some Unitarians seem to imagine — at any rate you can hear them say so — that because they have freedom to think for themselves they are under no obligation to think constructively. It is bad enough to hear an outsider say that Unitarians merely don't believe— that they have no positive beliefs at all; but when Unitarians themselves confirm such a statement it is infinitely worse. Emerson's oft-quoted phrase about the "pale negations" of Unitarianism would become our epitaph if it were ever to come to represent the truth about more than a small minority among us.

Fortunately, the great majority of Unitarians have very positive beliefs indeed. We do not agree among ourselves on a great many points, of course, because our basic charter of individual liberty precludes any such possibility; but our differences of opinion are the best possible proof of the positive character of our beliefs. We take the whole matter of religious beliefs seriously. We are free to think, and we make use of that freedom. We do not accept our beliefs on authority, and when we have hammered them out for ourselves they have a certain toughness of fibre that is very durable. They are positive, not negative. And they most certainly are not pale!

Such positive beliefs, held in perfect freedom by men and women who have thought their way through honest doubt to equally honest faith, are tremendously needed in our modern time. That is one reason why Unitarians have only begun to render their true service to the world.

F. M. E.

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